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we can do things.” So there was a movement in the civil rights movement in the north. A similar movement was organized against the nuclear testing. You had a general sense of vibration that was happening. But the New Left was made up of kids who had no adult group to go to. We had failed them, and so they formed SDS. They were very, very important. They organized the first large scale demonstration against the Vietnam war in 1965. Tragically, they were divided and shattered by the effort by the Maoist group to take control, and with a very sectarian line, and it destroyed SDS. It’s split among other things, it ended up with the... what am I thinking of? The...

EH: Weathermen?

DM: Well they’re underground. That as a very left-wing group, and it effectively destroyed the New Left, but it had been a very powerful group.

EH: What do you mean when you say that you all had failed the New Left?

DM: Well in the 1930’s, if you were a young person, you could join the Socialist Party or you could join the Communist Party. There were two well organized adult groups. But by 1960’s those groups didn’t exist, so if you were a young person, where did you go? The sense of direction and meaning is lost, and you were left with the New Left, you were left to find your own way.

EH: Obviously you had McCarthyism and the crack up of the Communist Party intervening in that period leading up 1960’s, but do you think that there was some way that those organizations could have weathered that period?

DM: No. They were burned up, and that is leaving aside a discussion of the Trotskyists who were not relevant despite their damage to the Socialist Party. There were at least two problems. One was that the Communist Party and with it all groups that take a Leninist position or a Trotskyist position believe in the vanguard theory. And the vanguard theory is, there is one party or one group that is leading the mass of people. There cannot be two vanguards, only one vanguard. Any other group which is saying that it is leading the struggle is the enemy and must be attacked. There can be only one vanguard.

The CP and all the Trotskyists, infamous with a number of multiplications of Trotskyist groups, are all fighting for the role of the leader or the vanguard. That was a fatal mistake by Leninist movement. The Socialist Party was really haunted by anti-communism, not from McCarthy at all, but from our experience back from 1917 when the split occurred between the socialists and the communists. It was a very bitter split. I do not think you can grasp from here how damaging anti-communism was. We had been united and struggled to overthrow capitalism, but the nature of what happened in the Soviet Union was so terrible that it made any attempt to defend the Soviet Union impossible.

On the other hand, there are certain historic inevitabilities about what happened in the Soviet Union. After the revolution occurred, there were two views. Trotsky had one and Stalin another. They were both right in an odd way. Stalin felt there could not be a world revolution at that time. And he was right that what you had to do was to defend the worker’s state, the first worker’s state. That is my class, and that meant industrialization, building up a military machine and changing Russia from a peasant economy to an industrial economy.

Trotsky argued for a world revolution and said, “If you focus only on Russia, you’re going to have a militarized dictatorship isolated from the world.” And they’re both quite right. Trotsky’s analysis was absolutely correct. But a world revolution was not possible, and there he was wrong. Stalin was right that the worker’s state needed to be defended, but inevitably became, well, Stalin. Both groups had been really destroyed by their internal contradictions.

The Soviet Union did some good things. I think it is very hard for Americans to have any grasp of what World War II meant. There were about 27 million Russians who died in that. One out of every ten Russians was killed. And that leaves you with a large number of wounded that become a burden on society, of orphans who lost their parents, and of women who have no husbands. It’s very hard to conceptualize what life is like in 1946 when the war was over. And the war had destroyed all of Russia from a line from Leningrad in the north, through Moscow, down to Stalingrad and everything west of that was destroyed. Every factory, every airport, every dam, every railroad station, all the housing was destroyed. We have never really grasped what the war meant to Russia. This does not justify Stalin at all, but it is important to see that.

I am not defending Stalin, I am trying to explain the complexities. Stalin entered the Hitler-Stalin pact, for example, because the West had turned him down when he went to the West and asked that they would form an alliance against Hitler, and they said no. Stalin, having been turned down by the West, then signed the infamous Hitler-Stalin pact. We did not really give much alternative to him. I am just explaining how tragic life was in a way, and Stalin certainly was barbaric, but the hatred of what he had done could demoralize people who should not really have made that their life’s work, anti-Stalinism.

The SP had been destroyed by anti-communism, and the communist side had been hurt badly by the vanguard theory. At UCLA, when I was a student there, the CP cell put out word that the kids should not come to my apartment down by the beach because I worked for the FBI or the Dean’s office. I mean, that was really sort of nasty. Once, a couple of kids who had been in the CP joined us when they realized that the communists were not for artistic freedom. They thought I was too anti-communist, and I was. They felt I ought to get to know them and they took me to a party that the communists were having. It was full of young people like yourselves. Well, within 20 minutes of my arriving, the party ended. Everyone got their coats and left, because they were afraid to be in the same room with someone who was clearly working for the FBI. Do you see the paranoia on both sides?

I had a struggle which I think I won, mainly because I am a pacifist, but it is worth telling the story. We had a student group of young pacifists, and Dorothy Healey, who was the chair of the Southern California Communist Party and had been one of those indicted under the Smith Act, but not jailed, had come to our youth and said she wanted to have a discussion between the CP and the young pacifists. They come to me as the elder statesman and asked what they should do. I said, “Well, tell Dorothy, yes, we’ll have that discussion, but tell her they’ll have her speak for their side, because you will see that she will not agree to the discussion.” I was wrong. She agreed. We had the discussion in a basement in Pasadena, about 20 people on both sides, and they didn’t say anything, peace and a friendship, nothing political. But one of their people called me a couple days later and said they had not realized that we believed the things that we had talked about and they would like to have another discussion. I said, “Okay, but you have to say something. You can’t just say peace and friendship, and maybe it would be easier if just two or three of us met so you do not feel that you are exposing people.” And he agreed.

We met with Dorothy Healey and the editor of the *Communist Party Weekly*, and a Quaker, a fellow member of the SP, and myself. In the discussion my fellow socialist talked about the need for civil liberties for everyone, including Joe McCarthy. And Dorothy turned to the, one of those with us who was a quasi-Trotskyist and said, “Ted, I understand why they believe this, because they’re bourgeois, but you are kind of a Marxist. How can you defend freedom for McCarthy?” And I relaxed because it was the first honest word I ever heard from the communists in all those years. Dorothy and I became friends and I helped set up a meeting, a debate before I left California. I got to be on good terms with some of those in the CP up to their split in the end of the 90’s.

While I was not immediately part of the split in 1917, I certainly was a party unto it and affected by it, and damaged by it. Both sides were damaged by preconditions that were set, starting way back in 1917.

EH: So, what about Marxism? I ask because so many characters in this story are taking up different strands of Marxism. Do you think it was a good thing, a bad thing? Is there a place for Marxism?

DM: I am a Marxist, a democratic Marxist, but I am not well-read in Marx. I never read *Das Kapital*. I have picked it up from the people I have followed. I do believe that the material environment shapes our consciousness, that if you are born into poverty, your views of life are shaped by that. If you are born in Japan, your views of the world are shaped by that culture. I believe that people are not as such free agents as they think. They are shaped by the material environment. And I think that whoever controls the means of production does control the society. How you manage to transfer that to a social ownership is very hard to work out.

However, I am not a scientific Marxist. I think scientific Marxism is nonsense. If you look at the social movements, they were eager to be called scientific. They did not want to be considered just ordinary movements. You have ‘scientific’ socialism, you have... political science was not a science at all. You have sociology, which is not a science, but it goes by that name. None of those are real sciences. They cannot predict the future precisely. Marx chose that word to define his movement as opposed to the utopianism that had come before him. And on that I agree with Marx. I think Marx is very wealthy in terms of ideas. He is a major intellectual power in the world, not just in the West. I just regret that people became too attached to the idea of scientific Socialism and overlooked some of the humanist aspects of Marx’s early writings.

I think the movement is healthy if it has a good number of people and they have some idea of what Marx was talking about. Not an orthodox Marxist, but some idea. But I do not think everybody has to be a Marxist, and a strong movement can be built with lots of different views—Christian, Judaic, Buddhist.

EH: In a letter Marx writes to his friend Joseph Weydemeyer in 1852, Marx says that his one original discovery is the dictatorship of the proletariat. Do you think a party is useful for making Socialism? Do we need the dictatorship of the proletariat?

DM: Yes and no. First, we do need an organizing force. A socialist party or a socialist movement, if it is not too dogmatic, is very crucial for holding people together and directing the struggle. We are up against the state, the CIA, the FBI, the organized power of the Koch brothers, and so on. We need a movement, and that is a party or an organization. It does not have to run candidates.

But Marx, by dictatorship of the proletariat, was not talking about what Lenin ends up adopting. He meant, and it was a bad choice of words on his part, that up to that point the ruling class, even if it had a democratic façade, was really a kind of dictatorship of one class. Workers did not control the press, the radio, television. Those were run by people with money. You cannot start a newspaper if you do not have money. What you had is what can be called a dictatorship of the middle class. Free, yes, but not *that* free. You try to exercise that freedom and you see how fast the limits are put down on you, what you face in terms of legal restraints. But he said that the dictatorship of the proletariat would be more democratic, broader based. It meant the workers would dictate the politics, and he did not have in mind what Lenin set up, which was an actual dictatorship with a police force. That was not what Marx had in mind. There is a lot of confusion about what he meant. But he did mean that there would have to be a willingness to prevent the middle class from regaining power.

EH: You brought up that there does need to be a party or organization. I was wondering if we could talk about the DSA. What is the difference between a party and an organization? What kind of organization are you talking about and is the DSA similar to what you have in mind?

DM: Party means the organized center of a movement, whether it runs candidates or not. DSA would fit my definition of a party, although I think it is not going to run its own candidates. DSA is formed these days

by the kids who were involved in the Bernie Sanders campaign. They found a new place to go in the DSA, and they may eventually decide to run candidates. You can decide to run candidates in some areas and not others. Here in New York, the lower east side, where I ran for congress a couple of times and got 5% of the vote in ’68, it was the height of the Vietnam War, so it was possible to run a political campaign, we had no thought of winning the election at all. At the same time, I found in this area where we lived that the city council person was in the Democratic Party. She was for many years a communist working through the Democrats. Very militant, always a lone wolf. She lost an election because we did not work for her and got a Republican. We found out, under Giuliani, how dangerous it was to have a Republican in the race and so we later supported the Democratic candidate for city council who was a Puerto Rican lesbian and probably came out of the Puerto Rican Communist Party. And it is a left seat here, which means the Democrats win. In some cases people on the Left have supported Democrats, in some cases they run as independents, and in some cases they do something else entirely than run in an election.

EH: When you see young people today who are in the DSA and call themselves socialist, do you think they are in the tradition of the SP, of your work?

DM: I do, I think they are part of a tradition of democratic, organized alternatives.

EH: Do you see any differences between the way you organized back in the SP and how socialists are organizing today?

DM: Yes, I think the SP was fixated on running candidates. I think one of the problems we have got in this country, and I have never worked it out myself, is that the country really is a two-party country. Minor parties, and I am old enough to have seen many, have all been defeated. You can look at everything from Teddy Roosevelt to Debs. All of them, without exception, have been defeated, have not been able to build an ongoing national structure. Every time they thought they could build a new, third alternative. Every time, they have ended up going to the Democrats or Republicans. This is because the moment a movement gains strength, the Democrats or Republicans will adopt its key points to win them back. We are stuck with that in an odd way. Even though they are very different, even though the two parties are in fact more than two. In the Democratic Party under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, you had the southern Democrats who were racist, not to mention segregationist. And in the north, you had the big-city Democrats and the trade unions. They combined to run the country for all of FDR’s time. Half of them racist, violent segregationists and half of them progressive in the same party. You really had two parties: a southern and a northern party. The Republicans also have the moderate Wall Street people in New York and the East Coast and the fundamentalists that you find in the Midwest or the mountain states that back Trump. They work in the framework of the Republican Party.

EH: Do you believe the DSA has been or will be able to avoid this dynamic where different movements that you see as challenging, for example, the Democrats get sucked back into the two parties?

DM: They could. It depends on how mature their leadership is, how much they can avoid infiltration by small groups that want to take control of DSA, which see DSA as a good thing if only they could take charge of it. They need to maintain a broad outlook to do this, and I do not know if they can. I hope they can. I have been very impressed with the DSA kids I have encountered here on the East Coast.

EH: You discussed earlier that it will be necessary to take state power in order to make the revolution against the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. There is a common view that would say this means winning elections. However, you have stressed that it is not necessary for a party to run candidates. How would a party take power in other ways besides electoral politics?

DM: It would help if you go back and look at this country before the Russian Revolution. One of our problems on the Left is that everyone keeps thinking about October 1917. Where it went wrong or where it was right. And they forget that there was a mass democratic, socialist movement in this country under Eugene Debs at the turn of the century, about 1900, through 1917, when they had the international split with the Soviet Revolution. That was a mass, American party. We had no foreign examples to guide us. We should go back and look at that, both the weakness and the strength. We thought then that we could build a third party, that was the whole point. Turns out that is harder to do than we think, but you can certainly build local groups. You can win members of congress and hold on to those seats. If you think about the SP in Milwaukee, we had the mayor from 1948 to 1960. Frank Zeidler was not a revolutionist. He was a socialist, but not a Marxist. Frank was the mayor of Milwaukee for three terms at the height of McCarthy, so he proves you can do it. He had no national party to back him, the party in Wisconsin was its own thing. It couldn’t continue after him because times were changing.

EH: So why did the old Socialist Party fail? Do you believe it was a mistake for the Socialist Party to be a third party? There was also the split that occurred in 1917 after the Russian Revolution. Eugene Debs himself at the time said that he was a Bolshevik, but many in the party disagreed with him.¹

DM: Looking back, there are lots of reasons for what happened, not just the division between the socialists and the communists in 1917, but the fact the Socialist Party opposed World War I. World War I was a very popular war, it may have been the most popular war we ever fought. People did not play Bach or Beethoven because it was German. Sauerkraut was called “Liberty Cabbage.” It was a whole weird identification with a total patriotic war to end all wars, to make the world safe for democracy. I think the Socialist Party lost some appeal because it really had opposed the war. Our people went to prison because of it, including Debs. While that is a great part of our history, it also did not help us win

a lot of people. Plus, the Russian Revolution led to the kind of McCarthyite phase of 1920-21, when the Palmer Raids occurred. I do not think you can blame it on the party, you have to look at the context. I think Debs decided by the end of the ’20s that we needed a labor party, not a socialist party. You ended up with Norman Thomas, a one-man ruler, in a sense. Not really the leader of a mass party.

EH: What advice would you give to someone who wants to make socialism today?

DM: I think you should read the Debs biography, *The Bending Cross*, which is a good biography of Debs, not dogmatic but very moving. There is a wealth of literature in the socialist movement, I would ask someone academic what they would recommend. I would be very cautious of groups with a Trotskyist tradition. I have found them very difficult to work with and inclined to split over the slightest agreement to have a perfect line, and you’re never going to have the perfect line.

SG: Do the Trotskyist groups still tend to split all the time?

DM: Yes, they do. If there is a parallel, it would be in the Christian church, where for all the folks in the Catholic church, there was really just that one split of Luther. The Catholic church has remained steady, unified. It has been there for a thousand years, it is still there, ups and downs, good and bad, corrupt and saintly—it is there. But Martin Luther, in breaking, set in motion the concept that it was okay to question the authority of the church, which meant you could question Luther. If you look at the Christian faith, there are a dozen division within Christianity which were possible because of Martin Luther’s split with the Roman Catholic Church. The Trotskyists tend to take that position literally. If you can break with Moscow, which they did—very courageous of them, they deserve a lot of credit for that—everything is up for grabs and you lose sight of the importance of maintaining a united movement. You really have nothing else. We have no army, we have no newspaper, we have no radio, and it is very important for us to have a comradely sense that dominates the movement rather than search for the perfect answer. There is no perfect answer, and the Trotskyist groups will keep on splitting forever. There are maybe two dozen international Trotskyist movements today, which is silly, but they are there and they will keep on splitting. And they will carry that into any group they go into. They will try to seize the leadership of the group to make it the vanguard group.

My life experience has been that the communists are easy to work with compared to the Trotskyists. The communists have a good sense of the mass and the Trotskyists do not, and I do not either. I remember we had a meeting once to discuss how to organize to fight the raising of the subway fair. And I said we ought to organize a campaign around a no-fare, free subway, but an old guy present said, and he clearly had to be either of the Communist or Socialist Party because he said, “No, you can’t say free subway, people will think you’re nuts. You can say don’t raise the fare, they will understand.” He grasped immediately what made a mass movement possible, a demand that was achievable, not a demand that was perfect, good, right, but an achievable demand, do not raise the fare, whereas my position was to abolish the fare. Great position, but everyone who was working for a living and scraping to get by thinks, “Well, I don’t have time for that. I want to keep the fare as it is.”

Where is the mass of people? What are they going to put up with? And the old communist and socialist movements had a good sense of the mass. The Trotskyists don’t have that sense, they tend to look for more perfect, correct, idealistic, utopian solutions. And there is a paradox because we need to have the utopian solution put forward within the movement always, but it is not an immediate demand.

EH: How do you connect these immediate demands that the utopian demands?

DM: Very hard, that is up to you to work out, I have no idea. I am throwing it back at you. There is a value to the radical position. I came out of the War Resisters’ League and the pacifist movement, which is based on absolute values and absolute resistance to military service, for example. I think that that movement has a very important, prophetic role to play. In that sense, the utopian must be respected. | **P**

¹ “The Day of the People” (February 1919), written about the assassinations of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg during the Spartacist Uprising of the German Revolution, available online at <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1919/daypeople.htm>>.

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La Follette affirmed the need for “a militant political movement independent of the two old party organizations” but refused to use the campaign to organize an independent party, seeking instead to support progressive candidates within both major parties. Yet he did suggest that, depending on the results of the campaign, a new party might be formed after the election.

La Follette lost, of course, but after that loss he withdrew from the Conference, leading to its immediate deflation and seriously undermining the prospect of using the support generated by his campaign to constitute a new party. In the aftermath, the Conference scrambled to find a way forward but was split between the Socialist Party elements that wanted to form a Labor Party along explicit class lines and AFL and Progressive elements that favored either forming a Progressive Party or maintaining the Conference as a non-partisan pressure group. In either case these would avoid the question of class struggle and instead focus on championing “progressive” reforms in class-neutral terms.

The anti-party elements, including much of the AFL union representation, left the Conference. A rump of the CPPA was reconvened out of the pro-party elements, but the Labor Party faction led by the SPA was defeated by the Progressive Party faction. The Socialist Party subsequently abandoned the CPPA project, and the Progressive Party project fizzled out over the next few years.

As Ray Ginger put it in his biography of Debs, the SP learned the hard way that it had “walked into a trap” and, indeed, had set the trap for itself [447]. When the CPPA collapsed, it dragged the Socialist Party down with it. Having led their members into a much stronger organization, the Socialist officials now found it difficult to hold them together. The smallest convention in the history of the Socialist Party met in Chicago on February 23, 1925. There were forty-five delegates, all of them veterans. Morris Hillquit called them the die-hards. [447]

Debs, for his part, reflected at that convention that

I seem to have been delivered from a nightmare... While we were in the so-called Progressive movement I felt as if I had lost my wings. I felt like an octogenarian snail just crawling along. Now I feel as if I could leap from crag to crag like a Rocky Mountain goat. [448]

The strategy of independent political organization for socialism that had been so successful in the 1900s and 1910s (as it had been in Europe since the 1880s) was hence further vindicated negatively. Attempting to form a broad, cross-class political coalition had nearly destroyed what little remained of the SP after WWI.

All that being said, the CPPA was in no sense comparable to an alliance with, let alone an entry into, the Democratic Party. Debs was extremely clear throughout that the Socialist Party, far from giving up on independent political organization for socialism, was only seeking another way forward for that project after having been forced into retreat.

For example, he wrote in 1924,

What will take place at St. Paul on June 17 or at Cleveland on July 4, we do not know and cannot tell, but we *do know that whatever the outcome of those conventions, the Socialist Party will be more imperatively needed and in greater demand than ever before in its history.*

For myself, I earnestly hope a united Labor Party, based upon the principles of industrial democracy and cornerstoned in the interest of the working class, may issue from these conventions; but whether it does nor not we must preserve strictly the identity and guard rigidly the integrity of the Socialist Party as an uncompromising revolutionary political organization of the workers in their struggle for emancipation.

In the event of a united party with which we have affiliation, we shall be in position to carry forward our educational work to better advantage, as the Independent Labour Party was in developing and building up the British Labour Party in England.

In case our Party should not merge in the present movement for a united party, we shall need as never before to be on the political battlefield this fall, sounding the clear note and issuing the clarion call in the babel of confusion, for the unconditional surrender of capitalism and the triumphant emancipation of the working class.⁴

Early in 1925, he wrote,

Let me make it clear that I am not wanting another Socialist Party organized. We already have one and that is enough. Neither do I want another capitalist party organized, having already two, more than enough.

A middle-class party, by whatever name, would still be a capitalist party, for while it might champion ‘little interests’ against ‘big interests,’ with a sop to labor, it would still stand for the capitalist system and the perpetuation of wage-slavery.

If a genuine Labor Party is organized at Chicago I shall not expect the platform to go the limit of radical demands but shall be satisfied with a reasonable statement of labor’s rights and interests as well as its duties and responsibilities, doubting not that with the progress of the party its platform will in due time embrace every essential feature of the working class program for deliverance from industrial servitude.

The Socialist Party can, should, and I have no doubt will join such a party wholeheartedly, become

an integral part of its structure, reserving, however, its autonomy unimpaired and using all its powers and functions in building up, equipping, promoting, and directing the general party.

To this end the Socialist Party must stand fearless and erect, inflexible and uncompromising for the working class upon the basis of the class struggle and wage the war against capitalism for the liberation of labor from its age-old bondage.⁵

And at the Second Convention of the CPPA, he said,

Now I believe that it is impossible to compromise a principle, and the Socialist Party is committed to a certain principle. To compromise principle is to court death and disaster. It is better to be true to a principle and to stand alone and be able to look yourself in the face without a blush, far better to be in a hopeless minority than to be in a great popular and powerful majority of the unthinking.

Do you know that all the progress in this whole world’s history has been made by minorities? I have somehow been fortunately all of my life in the minority. I have thought again and again that if I ever find myself in the majority I will know that I have outlived myself. There is something magnificent about having the courage to stand with a few with and for a principle and to fight for it without fear or favor, developing all of your latent power, expanding to the proportional end, rising to your true stature, no matter whose respect you may forfeit, as long as you keep your own.

I am glad to stand with a staunch revolutionary minority, and the capitalists understand what we are and what we stand for, even if the workers don’t. They don’t object in the least to the organization of a third party. They know very well it will not last very long, but they are decidedly opposed to the organization of a labor party. That is what they are opposed to, and if a labor party is organized, it must expect from the very beginning to be misrepresented and ridiculed and traduced in every possible way, but if it consists of those who are the living representatives of its principles it will make progress in spite of them, and in due course of time it will sweep into triumph.

So I have learned to be patient and to bide the time. I am expecting something from this body before it adjourns. But let me say to you, whether I receive what I expect or not, I shall not leave here disappointed. Long, long ago in my life I learned how to refuse to be disappointed. No one can disappoint me but myself, and I refuse to betray myself. I can’t do that. I prefer to be on speaking terms with myself, and so I stand for this principle. Make the appeal to the working class on this principle.⁶

There is no question that Debs went to his grave convicted of this principle, which guided his political

activity from the moment he became a socialist. The CPPA may have been a mistake. The SP suffered the consequences of allowing itself to lose its political independence within a cross-class political alliance. But the SP did not champion the CPPA as a renunciation of that principle; it did so under the unfortunately mistaken assumption that it could preserve its political independence in the process.

For that matter, the SP of that time, and Debs least of all, never considered either capitalist party as a vehicle they could use to their advantage. They recognized the necessity of standing in clear opposition to the capitalist parties by maintaining their independence from them. Unfortunately, the CPPA ended up muddling that clarity, which is why the SP finally abandoned it.

The assertion that the lesson of Debs’s career, and of the Socialist Party he built and led until his death, is that the principle of independent socialist political organization should be forsaken, and that Debs himself would have admitted as much, is so profoundly disconnected from the actual history and so completely out of step with everything Debs said and did from his conversion to Socialism until his death that it could only issue from someone either completely ignorant of the legacy of Debs and the old Socialist Party of America or bent on deliberately misrepresenting that legacy in order to rationalize their betrayal of the principle task that defined it.

The Socialist Party is more imperatively needed than ever before in its history. It should be in greater demand now than ever before; yet today’s socialists are afraid to raise this demand by building the party. The principle that motivated Debs to build that party can—and *must*—motivate its rebirth today. To continue to compromise this principle is to accept the consequences long attested by history: *death and disaster*. | **P**

1 See Greg Guma’s 1989 book, *The People’s Republic: Vermont and the Sanders Revolution*, p. 19–42. Guma, incidentally, was also running for Mayor of Burlington that year as a candidate for the Citizen’s Party but withdrew so as to avoid splitting the “progressive” vote.

2 See, for example, Engels’s letter to August Bebel available at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1891/letters/91_10_24.htm.

3 This call can be found at <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/spusa/1921/0900-spanec-unitedaction.pdf>.

4 See <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/spusa/1924/0614-debs-spduetogain.pdf>

5 See <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/spusa/1925/0100-debs-amertlaborparty.pdf>

6 See <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1925/250221-debs-speechtothecppa.pdf>

Modern today means old: A discussion with Frederic Rzewksi

Jim Igor Kallenberg

A letter from Frederic Rzewski published with permission as introduction to the edited transcript of an interview conducted by Jim Igor Kallenberg on August 22, 2018. Frederic Rzewski is an American composer and pianist.

‘1968’ SEEMS TO BE THE FASHION THIS YEAR, particularly in cultural institutions like museums and festivals. Why 50 years should have any significance I do not understand. But so be it.

Please allow me to express some scepticism regarding this wave of fashion.

I really do not see anything to celebrate. The year in question was a year of war and repression on a planetary scale. Wars, particularly that in Vietnam, assumed a truly horrifying scale. Martin Luther King was assassinated. Nixon came to power. There was a feeble revolutionary movement, which was however weakened by the absence of rational organization, an infantile anarchist tendency that appealed mainly to the children of bourgeois families (“figli di papa”), subversion by genuinely fascist provocateurs, and general stupidity.

Culturally, it seems to me that these movements produced little or nothing. There were some experimental theatre groups, like the Living Theatre, Bread and Puppet, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe and some really good pop music groups like the Grateful Dead. (“Serious” music paid little or no attention to the so-called revolution in progress. Stockhausen knew nothing of the outside world; John Cage and Merce Cunningham were afraid of anything political.) The main source of energy for these groups was the mass resistance among the youth against the war; their effectiveness, although certainly significant, was nonetheless limited: several long years of horror and destruction were necessary before the war finally ground to a stop. (It never really ended.)

Far from “love and peace,” violence was the rule. The Rolling Stones hired the Hell’s Angels to provide security at their concert in LA. Some people tried to climb onto the stage and were killed. Terrorists appeared in Germany and Italy. The Bologna railroad station was bombed. The Black Panthers (a truly revolutionary organization) were simply murdered. A period of reaction began which continues today. We owe the present revival of fascism to the failed “revolution” of 1968.

I do not know what music your festival is presenting from that time, except for my own little piece, but there really was not that much.¹ As far as I can see, the only reason it has now become somehow acceptable is because it is now old. I have nothing against old music; it is generally better than the new variety. But there are a few signs of vitality in today’s music, which unfortunately is no more performed today than it was fifty years ago, and probably less so. But then, “modern” today

means “old.”

Best regards,
FR

Frederic Rzewski: The problem with today’s treatment of 1968 is that it is not about facts, but it is a myth. And this particular myth is precisely about obscuring the facts that might have made 1968 significant: workers are not mentioned. The anti-colonial fights are not mentioned. It is all about culture. And really there was not very much happening in culture those days besides Rock music.

Jim Kallenberg: So what did really happen politically? Have you been active or affiliated to any political party or organisation?

FR: No, never. You know, I’m a Groucho-Marxist, as the comedian said: “I don’t care to belong to any club that will have me as a member.” I mean, of course, I was in Rome and I was close to the Italian Communist Party (PCI), but listen, I can only tell you about me, what I did and what I did not do: I drank a lot of wine. I also smoked a lot of hashish. But I did not go to jail and most notably I did nothing important. I did not do politics, I am a composer, I make music, but especially at that time, I did not even do that. You know, we were privileged Americans, I had the Fulbright Fellowship, so I could go to restaurants twice a day. And that is precisely what we did. People had fun and called it ‘revolution’.

JK: But you wrote pieces, political pieces. No matter in which mediated ways, your pieces seem to relate a lot to politics.

FR: Of course, with the ensemble we founded, Musica Elettronica Viva, we went to play in occupied factories, mental hospitals, and prisons. Most of the time we played in student centers and the radical students attacked us, because it was reactionary, bourgeois electronic music, not people’s music. They wanted us to play Rock music, but we couldn’t play Rock music, we were composers. Later, with my piece *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, which for the so called radicals was too abstract, I was attacked by the classical music audience, for it was tonal and too direct music. So I was attacked from both sides. All of that has nothing to do with music, of course.

And yes, I wrote *Les moutons de Panurge* and *Coming Together*, but I never understood why these pieces became so popular. I still don’t. Maybe, because it is easy. Musically they are not interesting at all, there is no music in it.

JK: What do you consider to be music then? Especially these pieces develop an irresistible musical drift, motivated by a – if you want – non-musical concept.

FR: You know, I worked very closely with Stockhausen, he was not political at all, but intelligent and he knew about composition. He always insisted on composition. Cage to the contrary definitely did things that were important, but he was not an important composer.

Like today, there are interesting young people, but I cannot see any composers. And even though Stockhausen was a good composer, Strauss was still better and, of course, the best composer of the 20th century. Henze and Stockhausen were the last German composers. In the USA there haven’t even been composers. Duke Ellington and George Gershwin were the best composers in the States. Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* is in fact to be compared with *La Bohème* by Puccini. People do not play it as an opera, they treat it as if it is a musical comedy. But it is not. It is an opera. And a great one. It is about black people, so it cannot be an opera. Even today you cannot write an opera on black people, only a musical comedy.

JK: What has changed? What is composition today?

FR: It is not clear what music, what composition is today. We used to study counterpoint, but that is not the basic discipline anymore. You hardly find anyone studying counterpoint today, and if so, they do it badly, because their teachers have no idea of it. Maybe composition in that sense does not exist anymore, maybe it comes to an end and something new will come out of it. The same might apply to politics.

JK: So if there is something new, there might be a new potential.

FR: Well, the big difference is, of course, that there is no communist party today. Without a revolutionary party, you cannot make a revolution, that is simply true. And on the other hand you can never be sure. But I see no consciousness anymore in the art-scene. In painting today... Is there any consciousness? It is all about money. In rap music, there is some consciousness, yes, but in painting it seems to me there is nothing – show me a painter.

So, it is never clear where the possibilities are. In the sixties there were a lot of groups that had a fascist character. Not only the FBI that produced and circulated revolutionary pamphlets, also the Brigade Rosse in Italy – they’ve seen themselves to be revolutionaries. They were not. They created confusion and that is what fascists do. Not everybody who shouts the loudest is

revolutionary. There is a very important book by Lenin from 1920, “*Left Wing Communism*.” He wrote on the Russian Anarchists, who thought of themselves as radical leftists, but in fact they were not, Lenin called it an “infantile disorder”.

But you’re asking the wrong person, I understand only part of this. I am a musician. I have to write music, better music, I have no time to engage in politics that much.

JK: Does your music deal with politics?

FR: Of course. I see myself in the tradition of Hanns Eisler and “Das Politische Lied,” as we had it in Eastern Germany – even though I hardly compose songs. I am not a good songwriter. Eisler was a good songwriter, not only the political songs. There are plenty of examples for politics using, instrumentalizing music, but not one example of music using and instrumentalizing politics. I do not know any composer who had a direct influence on politics except Richard Wagner. In 1937 some German businessmen once approached General Franco to make a deal and Franco agreed, but only if they convince Hitler to intervene in the civil war in Spain, which was of no interest for the Wehrmacht. The businessmen approached Hitler in Bayreuth, during the Festspiele, where they met in a Hotel after the performance of *Siegfried*. Hitler said yes and the operation “Feuerzauber” was launched. Guernica was completely destroyed. That is the political effect. But again, what can we say, who knows what the world would be like. Without Mozart having written *Die Zauberflöte*, maybe we would be all ruled by evil Sarastros.

JK: Maybe we are.

FR: True. We do not know, we can only do better. Listen, I am over 80 years and I cannot say that I did anything important. I am still trying to learn and do better. Berio used to say, “it can always become better.”

JK: Right, it does not help to say, “it could be worse.” We tend to forget that it could be better, too.

FR: It has nothing to do with right or wrong, it is much simpler: If I do not write music I will have to die. But I do not want to die, I want to stay alive. So, I have to write music. And I cannot make the same music all the time, so I have to get better and better. | **P**

1 The festival referenced is the *Wien Modern*, and the piece in questions is *Les moutons du Panurge*. Jim Kallenberg works for the festival and had been discussing it with Frederic Rzewski when this was written.

Would Eugene Debs support socialists running as Democrats?

Sanders, Shachtmanism, and the death of the Debs legacy

Reid Kane

Debs the Democrat

AFTER RISING UP THE RANKS of the labor movement in the 1870s and 80s, Debs was courted by the Democratic Party of Indiana to run for state legislature in 1884, and handily won the election. Yet his career as a Democratic Party politician was short-lived. As Ray Ginger, in his biography of Debs, *The Bending Cross*, recounts,

When Debs was sworn into the state House of Representatives on January 8, 1885, he had already drafted a bill which would require railroad companies to compensate their employees for injuries suffered on duty. Appointed to the Railway Committee, he maneuvered the bill through the lower chamber, and rejoiced when it was sent to the Senate. But his exultation was short-lived. When the bill reached the State Senate, the members of that body toyed with it for a few days, finally cut the guts out of it. Debs, convinced that he had failed the railroad workers, promptly withdrew the bill from consideration. Other measures in which Debs was deeply interested also went down to defeat. He bolted his party to vote with the Republicans on a bill to abolish all distinctions of race and color in the laws of Indiana, but the bill lost by three votes. He voted for a bill to extend suffrage to women; again he was on the losing side. By the time for adjournment, Debs had decided not to stand for re-election. He was ill-suited for the compromise and favoritism of political life, but his reaction was much too extreme. By the standards of the times, that legislative session in Indiana was a good one; it passed a resolution supporting a Federal eight-hour law for all trades but agriculture, and wrote into law an equal rights act for all places of “public accommodation or amusements,” a township tax of 1 per cent for the support of the libraries, a mechanics’ lien law, coal-mine safety provisions, a prohibition on the importation of foreign contract-labor. But Eugene Debs felt that he had failed his electorate; when he reached home in March, he told Theodore that he would never again run for public office. [42–43]

Over the following decade, Debs remained generally supportive of the Democratic Party, which nominally defended the cause of workers and farmers against the increasingly despotic owners of capital, whose interests were represented by the Republican Party. This was seemingly confirmed when the Republican Harrison administration aided the suppression of strikes at Coeur d’Alene, Idaho and Homestead, Pennsylvania in 1892, and when Harrison’s Democratic opponent, Grover Cleveland, voiced support for the workers against the collusion of their employers and the state, contributing to his victory later that year.

Debs campaigned for Cleveland in 1892 out of support for the working class against the collusion of capital and the state. Yet Debs knew the Democrats were anything but consistent and was more or less skeptical of the political establishment as a whole, siding with the Populist insurgency of workers and farmers in the early 1890s, which began organizing a new party. This skepticism was brutally validated when, in 1894, President Cleveland’s administration sent Federal troops to crush the Pullman Strike led by Debs’s recently formed American Railway Union.

This confirmed for Debs the necessity of independent political action on the part of the working class. The Democrats and Republicans alike supported the rule of capital against the struggle of the working class to improve their position in society. Only by representing themselves in the political sphere could the working class hope to break the collusion between capital and the state.

Yet the Populist movement was by no means uniform in its conviction to build an independent political party of workers and farmers, with many seeking instead to influence and transform one or both of the major parties. In the 1896 election, the Democratic Party sought to overcome the damage to its reputation that resulted from Cleveland’s suppression of the Pullman Strike, and to capitalize on the Populist insurgency, by nominating William Jennings Bryan—a Democrat popular within the Populist movement—as its Presidential candidate. The incipient People’s Party, rather than maintaining itself as an independent political force, also nominated Bryan, and much of the Populist movement was, as a result, folded into the Democratic Party base.

While Debs expressed support for the People’s Party, he had lost whatever remaining faith he had in the Democratic Party. He was won over to socialism in 1895 while serving his prison sentence for leading the Pullman Strike, and while he maintained hopes in the People’s Party despite its endorsement of Bryan and campaigned for it in 1896, he would ultimately recognize that the Populist movement failed because it was unable to preserve its independence.

Socialism, unlike Populism, reflected the necessity of independent political organization of the working class: Rather than simply seeking reforms to ameliorate the condition of working people, the socialists proposed that the working class should organize itself to take power, as only the working people could realize the potential for freedom capital represented. Capital was the means of production through universal cooperation, and as such, it could not be effectively and responsibly managed by individual owners. It could only be administered through the conscious cooperative management of the workers themselves, who had to organize to take political power in order to wield it to that end.

Sanders the Socialist?

Debs spent the remainder of his life building and leading an independent political party of the working class

for socialism. Sanders, by contrast, began his political career with an independent socialist party, the Liberty Union Party of Vermont, running as their candidate in a number of elections in the 1970s. Yet by the end of the 70s he had grown disillusioned with this political strategy, during which time he produced an audio documentary about Eugene Debs.

In 1980, Sanders returned to politics, running as an independent candidate for Mayor of Burlington, Vermont. He managed to defeat the Democratic incumbent by agreeing to cooperate with Republican leadership, leading them to abstain from fielding a candidate.¹ As Mayor, Sanders built a coalition of supporters to win seats on city council, enabling him to overcome the veto power of Democratic opposition. This coalition grew beyond Burlington by joining the “Rainbow Coalition” supporting Jesse Jackson’s bids to become the Democratic Party presidential nominee in 1984 and 1988. In 1999 it constituted itself as the Vermont Progressive Party.

Yet Sanders did not join the Progressive Party. After eight years as Mayor of Burlington, he ran for Congress in 1988 when Republican Congressman Jim Jeffords vacated his seat to run for Senate. The Republican candidate, Peter Smith, won with 41% of the vote, while Sanders, who ran as an independent, received 38%, and Democratic candidate Paul Poirier 19%.

Not long after Sanders announced his bid to become the Democratic Party’s 2016 presidential nominee, Chris Hedges voiced his opposition to Sanders during a radio broadcast with Ralph Nader, complaining that Sanders would only “funnel” the enthusiasm his campaign generated “back into a dead political system.” Hedges went on to express his perplexity as to why Sanders, despite having “fought the Democratic establishment in Vermont his entire career,” had now “sold out to it.”

Paul Street, in an article for *Counterpunch* entitled “Bernie Out of the Closet: Sanders’ Longstanding Deal with the Democrats,” addressed Hedges’s confusion on this matter. While Sanders indeed “presented himself to the left outside of Vermont as the leader of the third party movement, vanquishing the two major parties in every Mayoral election,” the 1988 congressional race taught him a lesson in “the perils of third party politics.” By apparently “splitting” the “progressive” vote, Sanders had enabled the Republican contender to win the election. “Sanders responded by drifting right and cutting a deal with the Vermont Democrats: the party would permit no serious candidate to run against him while he blocked serious third party formation in Vermont and adopted positions in line with the national corporate war Democrats.”

Street quotes from Will Miller’s 1999 article, “Bernie the Bomber’s Bad Week”:

Bernie—out of office for the first time in eight years—went to the Kennedy School at Harvard for six months and came back with a new relationship with the state’s Democrats. The Vermont Democratic Party leadership has allowed no authorized candidate to run against Bernie in 1990 (or since) and in return, Bernie has repeatedly blocked third party building. His closet party, the Democrats, are very worried about a left 3rd party forming in Vermont. In the last two elections, Sanders has prevented Progressives in his machine from running against Howard Dean, our conservative Democratic Governor who was ahead of Gingrich in the attack on welfare.

The unauthorized Democratic candidate in 1990, Delores Sandoval, an African American faculty member at the University of Vermont, was amazed that the official party treated her as a nonperson and Bernie kept outflanking her to her right. She opposed the Gulf build-up, Bernie supported it. She supported decriminalization of drug use and Bernie defended the war on drugs, and so on...

After being safely elected in November of 1990, Bernie continued to support the buildup while seeking membership in the Democratic Congressional Caucus—with the enthusiastic support of the Vermont Democratic Party leadership. But, the national Democratic Party blew him off, so he finally voted against the war and returned home—and as the war began—belatedly claimed to be the leader of the anti-war movement in Vermont.

Since 1991 the Democrats have given Bernie membership in their Congressional Caucus. Reciprocally, Bernie has become an ardent imperialist...

Both Street’s and Miller’s indictments of Sanders deserve to be read in full.

To make a long story short, Sanders began his career as a candidate for an independent socialist party. He broke with that party to run as an “independent” but eventually reconciled himself with the Democratic Party. That process of reconciliation culminated with his 2016 campaign to become the Democratic nominee, whose outcome was to fold his base of support into the Clinton campaign. Sanders has been explicit since he entered the race: His goal was to breathe new life into the Democratic Party. To the extent that he has introduced “socialism” to a new generation, he has only done so by making “socialism” into the rallying cry for a Democratic Party revival.

Debs, by contrast, began his political career as a candidate for the Democratic Party but grew progressively disillusioned with that party, ultimately breaking with it in recognizing the necessity of building an independent socialist party. He dedicated the remainder of his life to that project. For Debs, socialism represented nothing if not absolute, intransigent opposition to the Democratic and Republican parties alike—and not merely ideological opposition, but the opposition of an organized force actively contending for political power in every electoral contest it could enter.

The death of the Debsian legacy

Sanders can claim Debs as his hero if he wants, but his own political career reflects nothing if not a total rejection of the principle that, for Debs, defined socialism: independent political organization of the working class against the parties of ruling class. Sanders himself embodies the final liquidation of the legacy of the Socialist Party of Debs.

Sanders was not responsible for the liquidation of independent socialist politics. This liquidation was already well underway when he was coming of age. The Socialist Party of America had effectively abandoned this principle by 1958 when it was taken over by the followers of a former Trotskyist named Max Shachtman (notably including Bayard Rustin and Michael Harrington). Shachtman and his followers concluded that it was no longer feasible to organize socialism as an independent political party. The Cold War in particular presented an immense obstacle to the viability of socialist politics in the United States.

Yet the Shachtmanites had not given up on socialism entirely. Their prognosis was that, if socialism were to become a viable political project again in the future, conditions for a future rebirth of the Socialist Party would have to be generated from the political morass that presently obstructed it. They saw potential to generate such conditions by effecting a “realignment” of the two capitalist parties.

The Democratic Party had, since the New Deal, maintained a firm grip on the labor movement but also encompassed rabidly anti-socialist Cold Warriors and the racist pro-segregationist “Dixiecrats.” The Republican Party, on the other hand, championed civil rights legislation despite lacking the congressional majority necessary to secure it and tended to aver the bellicose anti-Communism of the Democrats in favor of pragmatic moderation, while nonetheless posing as the party of “big business.”

Yet these divisions were becoming unstable as the New Deal coalition came into crisis. Shachtman saw an opportunity to use the growing issue of Civil Rights to instigate a sea change in both parties: If organized labor and the civil rights movement united in common cause, it could drive the Dixiecrats out of the Democratic Party and into the Republican Party. This would at once render the labor movement a more powerful constituency within the Democratic Party and render it the vanguard of the struggle for democracy represented by the civil rights movement, while purging the anti-democratic segregationist element. It would likewise lead the Republican Party to opportunistically unite reactionary anti-democratic racism with capitalist opposition to organized labor. This would then open up a new opportunity for socialist leadership, which would have the opportunity to expose the limitations to both the labor movement and to democracy posed by capitalism.

Something akin to the realignment Shachtman envisioned did, in fact, occur, although to what extent this was the product of a deliberate strategy on the part of the Shachtmanite Socialist Party is debatable. Yet by the early 70s, his followers did not see any prospects for a rebirth of independent socialist politics. At its 1972 convention (co-chaired by Rustin), the Socialist Party of America finally abandoned the pretense of remaining an independent political party, renaming itself Social Democrats USA.

Michael Harrington, who had been co-chair of the party before the convention, resigned that position just beforehand and left SDUSA the following year. Harrington complained that, while the organization had endorsed the presidential campaign of George McGovern, whose bid for the Democratic nomination was based largely on opposition to the Vietnam War, they had done too little to support him. The SDUSA leadership maintained ambivalence about the anti-war sentiment due to their deep opposition to Stalinist Communism, which they viewed as a fundamental obstacle to the possibility of socialism, and their suspicion of the pro-Communist sentiments that predominated among young anti-war activists.

Harrington would go on to form the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, forerunner of Democratic Socialists of America. DSOC, and then DSA, did not abandon the Shachmanite realignment strategy but further softened it. Rather than seeking to fundamentally reshape the landscape of mainstream politics to secure a future for socialism, Harrington sought merely to support and encourage progressive tendencies within the Democratic Party, hoping to cultivate a genuine “liberal” and “democratic” political current from which, someday, socialism might eventually reemerge.

Yet the legacy of the Socialist Party of America was not completely liquidated under the Shachtmanite leadership, whether they followed Rustin or Harrington. Dissenters in the SPA formed the “Debs Caucus,” which broke with the SDUSA to form the legitimate successor to the old party, keeping faith with the principle of independent political organization for socialism: the Socialist Party USA (of which the author is a member).

Sanders was a member of the youth wing of the Socialist Party of America, the Young People’s Socialist League, while in college in the 60s, before moving to Vermont in 68. It is unclear to what extent he was ideologically influenced by Shachtman and his followers. Yet by the end of the 70s, he was acquiescing to the same lowered horizons that defined the Shachtmanite prognosis.

Harrington’s followers were likewise beholden to this jaundiced view of the prospects for independent socialist politics. DSA in no sense maintains the legacy of the party of Debs but rather continues to lead its liquidation. Thus, while Sanders clearly motivated renewed interest in DSA after his 2016 presidential bid by (reluctantly) wearing the label of “democratic socialist,” it was not

simply the shared appellation that catalyzed DSA’s post-election growth. It was the fact that DSA, like Sanders himself, sees no future for socialism outside of the Democratic Party. In other words, it sees no future for the legacy of Debs.

Debs after the defeat of Socialism

Some defenders of Sanders and DSA will claim that, were Debs alive today, he would recognize that contemporary conditions make it not only possible, but even necessary, to “use” the Democratic Party to advance the cause of socialism. They will claim that Debs would defend “socialists” running as Democrats and endorsing Democrats. This reveals the extent to which the legacy of Debs, thanks to the misleadership of Shachtman, Harrington, and Sanders, has been utterly forgotten, or worse, “remembered” only for the sake of rationalizing its own ongoing liquidation.

From the time he converted to socialism until his death, Debs was clearly and unswervingly convinced of the necessity of independent political organization of the working class around the goal of socialism and was intransigently opposed to anything that would threaten or impede that project. That meant, above all, staking out a political position that was clearly independent of and opposed to both capitalist parties.

The only episode in Debs’s career as a socialist that could even possibly suggest otherwise is worth considering, however.

After 1920, the Socialist Party of America was decimated. Actually, that is a dramatic understatement. “Decimated” literally means “to lose one in every ten members.” Yet the Socialist Party of America had over 100,000 members in 1919. By 1922, it had just over 10,000. The Socialist Party of America was not decimated; it did not lose one out of every ten members. It lost nine out of every ten members.

Why this happened is complicated, but the overarching reason is that the international socialist movement (the Second International), and the Socialist Party of America as a section thereof, was unprepared for the existential threat posed by World War I. Yet the Second International was not blindsided by the war. A war of that kind had been prophesied for decades, above all by Engels himself, who recognized such a war as posing both a fundamental threat and opportunity.² The potential threat and opportunity posed by imperialist war was one of the fundamental theoretical and strategic questions animating debate within the socialist movement up to 1914 when the war finally broke out. Yet when the moment to take decisive action finally came, the movement was shattered.

This manifested, in part, in the split between the Socialists and the Communists, but at least in the US, this split cannot account for the entirety, or even the majority, of the exodus from the SP. Much of the losses resulted from state and para-state repression of the SP, which used the SP’s opposition to the war as an excuse: the imprisonment of many SP leaders for sedition, Debs included; refusal to seat elected Socialist Party representatives in legislative bodies, including Congress; intimidation and violent attacks by the state (the Palmer raids) as well as by anti-socialist groups like the American Legion and the reconstituted Ku Klux Klan; and perhaps most importantly, the suppression of the socialist press by the Postal Service, which severed the only means by which the party’s organizational apparatus could maintain itself on a national scale.

Furthermore, we should consider the effect of the pro-war sentiment drummed up by the ruling parties, a sentiment that manifested to a significant extent within the socialist movement itself as well as among the masses: The war was seen as a great war of democracy (the UK, France, and the U.S.) against the resurgent ambitions of old fashioned absolutist despotism (the Prussian and Austro-Hungarian Empires). In that context, opposition to the war looked like a defense of despotism against democracy, and many working class people in the U.S. and Europe, whether socialist or not, understandably sided with the latter against the former. The anti-war stance maintained by the SPA leadership made it vulnerable not only to state repression but to popular opposition in the name of international democratic revolution.

As a result, the SPA barely survived the war. For that matter, Debs, who despite his many shortcomings was the best leader the SPA had, was by that time nearly 70, and his health was ruined by decades of tireless party work and by the two years he spent in prison for opposing the war.

The party was desperate to find a way forward in the midst of catastrophe. It was in this context that the strategy of building a broad “Labor Party” along the lines of the Britain’s recently formed “Independent Labour Party” gained traction. While leaders of the SP’s right wing had been advocating this tack for some time, it only won substantial support (including that of Debs) in the early 20s, as a desperate measure.

The SPA issued a call to unite the “forces of every progressive, liberal, and radical organization of the workers” in order to “advance the industrial and political power of the working class.”³ This took the form of the Conference for Progressive Political Action, in which the SPA joined the major unions, the remnants of Populism advocating a “Farmer-Labor Party,” and the remnants of the “Progressive” movement, including Theodore Roosevelt’s Progressive Party and self-identified “progressives” in both the Republican and Democratic parties. The Conference ended up recruiting the old Progressive Republican Robert La Follette to run as their presidential candidate in 1924, with the support of Debs among other Socialists.